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Sonus faber Olympica I

Classic Italian style meets innovative design: but can Sonus faber scale down the success of its Olympica IIIs?
 Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Keith Howard**

The past few years have not only seen Sonus faber grow its range to encompass several complete lineups of speakers, but also parent company Fine Sounds expanding to encompass a number of high-end brands. More on that in our boxout panel, but the £3998 Sonus faber Olympica I speaker is something of a return to the company's roots: it's relatively small, exquisitely finished in solid wood and leather, and uses in-house components and design to make it unmistakably a product of the company's Italian factory.

A two-way design, standing just over 350mm tall, the Olympica I is the smallest model in a four-strong range taking as its inspiration Palladio's Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, Sonus faber's home town. The design of the speakers is said to reflect the sonic characteristics of the theatre, known for its remarkable acoustics as much as its aesthetic qualities, Sonus faber having long placed an emphasis on the abilities of its speakers to create a credible three-dimensional soundstage.

DEDICATED STANDS AVAILABLE

Reviewing the Olympica III, the range-topping floorstander [*HFN* May '14] Ken Kessler was clearly very taken with both the design and the sound, describing this as 'commanding yet capable of great delicacy, the soundstage huge, yet the imagery specific and precise'.

Can Sonus faber repeat the success story with the much smaller and less expensive standmount model? Well, all the *anatre* – the wood, the leather, the characteristic drivers – are lined up, just as they are in the flagship model; it's just that these smaller speakers will require the use of some speaker stands in order to make the most of them.

Sonus faber can supply a pair for an additional £849, which may sound a bit on the hefty side, but hefty is just what these

stands are. Made from anodised aluminium, and with a design derived from the Guarneri stands, they give the speakers just the right upward tilt, and come complete with stainless steel feet for stability. The tops of the stands bolt into the speakers, giving a solid single assembly with none of that messing about with upward-pointing spikes, Blu-tack or the like.

The speakers themselves use Sonus faber's 29mm silk 'Arrow Point' DAD (Damped Apex Dome) tweeter, said to combine the benefits of classic dome and ring transducer designs, while the mid/bass driver is a 150mm unit combining an 'eddy current free' voice coil with a 'dynamically linear' magnet assembly. The cone is made from an air-dried non-pressed blend of cellulose pulp, kapok and other natural fibres, coated with a viscous damping layer.

As well as Mundorf Evo oil capacitors and Jantzen inductors, the crossover uses Sonus faber's 'progressive slope' design, handing over between the drivers in a range centred on 2.5kHz. Twin sets of terminals, usually linked with jumper bars, are provided for bi-wiring, the screw-down clamps having a neat flanged design to make them easy to loosen or tighten.

Sonus faber calls this a 'Paralaminar "stealth ultraflex" vented loudspeaker', the enclosure itself following the company's 'Lyre' profile – in plan view it follows the shape of the classical instrument much-sporting by assorted nymphs, shepherds and vase-bound deities – with the curved walls being of progressive thickness to enhance the natural damping and prevention of internal standing waves.

The asymmetrical cabinet design is specific to the Olympica I, with one side of the speaker slightly longer than

RIGHT: Walnut and graphite finishes are offered, with leather top and baffle facings. Dedicated stands are available styled to match speaker detailing





FINE SOUNDS' GROWING STABLE

Sonus faber's flagship speaker launch in Venice a few years back was the kind of glitzy event almost unprecedented in high-end hi-fi, but when it was later announced that the name chosen for the product was having to be changed from 'Fenice' to simply 'The Sonus Faber', there were some mutterings about hubris. Similarly, there was later some grumbling from the faithful when it became clear its Venere range was being made in China. No such confusion with the Olympica models, which are made in Italy: this time it's the company behind the Sonus Faber brand that's left home! Having expanded in recent years to encompass Audio Research, McIntosh, Sumiko and Wadia, the Fine Sounds group was recently the subject of a management buyout by Mauro Grange, formerly CEO of the Italian speaker manufacturer, and Charlie Randall, President of McIntosh since 2001. So Fine Sounds is no longer that Italian audio company with some American high-end brands on its books – following the buy-out, it's now headquartered on Madison Avenue in New York.

the other, giving a narrow, offset rear panel (more of which anon). The cabinets, braced with solid walnut vertical clamps and available in either natural walnut or graphite finish, have maple joints between the panels providing a subtle pinstriped effect, and all the wood is coated with medium gloss lacquer.

Leather is used on the front baffles, as on the top and rear panels; and to one edge of the rear panel is the vent for the speaker's reflex port-loading, covered by an intricately detailed anodised stainless steel mesh grille. With the speakers in situ you'll never see these vents, but that's the kind of attention to detail involved here – the construction, fit and finish is a delight throughout, right down to the 'stringed' grilles, which echo the ribbing on the stands.



THE SONUS FABER MAGIC

Used with a range of amplifiers from the Technics SU-C700 integrated to the little Benchmark AHB2 power amp [see p50], but mainly with my Naim Supernait2/HiCap, fed from the Naim NDS/555PS and with all cabling from The Chord Company, it was immediately apparent that the old Sonus faber magic is very much present and correct here.

Following the suggestion of the comprehensive user manual, I positioned them well clear of side and rear walls (70-80cm is suggested, but of course this will vary from room to room) and with the characteristic Sonus faber toe-in to achieve the best soundstage focus. These aren't really speakers designed for 'straight down the room' firing: things really snap into place when you have them set up so you

can get a good sight of the 'outer' panels from the listening position, at which point you'll find them capable of really quite extraordinary imaging.

One intriguing set-up possibility comes about due to the fact that the speakers are 'handed', in that the reflex slot only exits on one side of the speaker. Thus it's possible to tune the bass by having the vents facing either inwards or outwards. Again, the effect will vary from room to

room, and so some experimentation is recommended, but I found the 'outward' set-up gave a subtle lift to the bass, while inward kept things good and tight. After a few hours of listening

'And they kept pace with the Philthy Animal's flat-out drumming'

either way, I found I preferred the latter.

Playing the country rock of Carrie Underwood, from her *Greatest Hits: Decade #1* album [Arista Nashville 500876], the Olympicas immediately impressed with the 'rightness' of their sound, even with very commercial material such as this. Both vocal tonality and clarity were excellent – impressive given the scale and warmth these little speakers can deliver, and handy when a song like 'Two Black Cadillacs' has a story to tell – while bass and drums had plenty of heft along with tightness and real pace.

Anyone labouring under the misconception that Sonus faber speakers are best with string quartets and forensically-recorded jazz needs to have a rethink: these speakers can be driven hard when required.

Mind you, they 'do gorgeous', too: loading up the ever-reliable jaw-dropper *Buddy Holly: From the Original Master Tapes* [MCA MCAD-5540] the Sonus fabers glide through 'True Love Ways' in a ↻

SONUS FABER OLYMPICA I

LEFT: The Olympia I is ported down one side only. A quartet of multi-way binding posts at the bottom allows for bi-wiring. Terminals are Sonus faber's own flanged type – easy to tighten

impetus. Similarly they even respond well to a spot of Mr Kilminster's finest overdriven thrash: these might not be the first speakers I'd suggest to a Motörhead fan, but whack them with a bit of amp power and they can thunder out 'We Are The Road Crew' [from *Ace Of Spades*, Sanctuary 929065] and then go on to keep pace with the Philthy Animal's flat-out drumming on 'Fire, Fire' in suitably room-filling fashion.

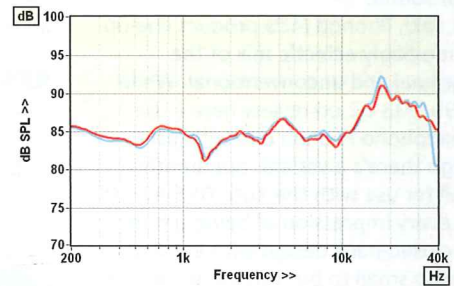
Well, small room-filling, anyway: these aren't speakers to use in massive spaces but will be more than sufficient for the average UK domestic room, and won't prove too onerous a load for most amplifiers.

Rest assured that these are very much classic Sonus faber speakers in smart new clobber, but much more than just an exercise in Italian styling. Fed by the Technics ST-C700 network music player via the Naim amp, and streaming the Engegård Quartet's new 2L recording of Britten's String Quartet No 2 [2L-105, DSD128 download], they delivered a wonderfully balanced, insightful yet rhythmically acute view of the music, placed in a credible acoustic.

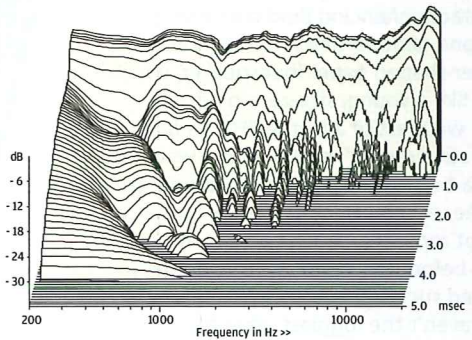
It's a sound much more about a performance spread before you, rather than something being recreated by circuits and computers and magnets and cones and wooden boxes, however lovingly crafted they all may be: the Sonus fabers are all about delivering music. ☺

Sonus faber claims 87dB sensitivity for the Olympia I which corresponds well with the 87.3dB we recorded by simply averaging the response data but less well with our pink noise result of 85.3dB. Given that 84.8dB was the outcome with a music-shaped spectrum, 85dB is a more realistic figure. This has been achieved while maintaining an amp-friendly impedance: we measured a minimum modulus of 4.2ohm – well in keeping with the nominal 4ohm figure – and although impedance phase angles are high, the EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) fell to a low of 2.3ohm at 125Hz, comfortably above the 1.7ohm often recorded by competing floorstanders.

Forward frequency response [Graph 1, below], measured on the tweeter axis, is essentially flat in trend until output begins rising above 10kHz. Up to this point the response errors are within ± 3 dB but the treble lift increases this to ± 5.0 dB and ± 5.5 dB respectively for 200Hz-20kHz. Pair matching over the same frequency range is good at ± 1.0 dB. Nearfield measurement of the bass response is complicated by the area of the rectangular reflex port being difficult to determine but weighting the driver and port outputs so as to align their infrasonic contributions resulted in a diffraction-corrected bass extension of 51Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz), a fair figure for this compact cabinet. At the opposite frequency extreme ultrasonic output is maintained to above 40kHz. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2] evinces fast initial energy decay but there is indication of a resonance associated with the dip in response at about 1.4kHz, and a few more low-level resonances are visible higher in frequency. KH



ABOVE: The Olympia I's response has a slight boost >10kHz but is essentially flat. Pair matching is good



ABOVE: Fast decay and only a few low-level (driver) resonances at 1.4kHz and through the higher treble

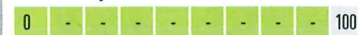
HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m)/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music	87.3dB/85.4dB/84.8dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	4.2ohm @ 184Hz 34.5ohm @ 85Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-55° @ 98Hz 50° @ 29Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	± 1.0 dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	51Hz >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.8% / 0.4% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	354x222x368mm

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

This is a small speaker as sumptuous and seductive in its sound as in its looks, with a wonderfully cultured, yet expressive balance sufficient to make you forget your hi-fi system and become immersed in the music. The optional stands really are a must-have, and absolute bass extension is limited, but this is still a remarkable, and very tempting design – and not just for fans of jazz and string quartets.

Sound Quality: 86%



manner that's lush and rich and warm while at the same time super-detailed, really dragging the listener into the recording studio by making the most of every vocal nuance, and revealing the breathiness of the saxophone to striking effect.

SPEED AND IMPETUS

So these are small speakers – you're not going to get any bass, right? Well, play something driven by a solid bass-line, such as The Pretenders' 'Talk Of The Town' [Pretenders II, MFSL UDSACD2056] and they keep the rhythm section motoring away behind the vocal, giving the track real speed and